

Twenty First Sunday of the Year August 21, 2016

Isaiah 66:18-21; Hebrews 12:5-7.11-13; Luke 13:22-30

God invites us to understand the ultimate goal of life and to discover the true meaning of life as we go in search of our final destiny. For many people who are engaged in such a search, religion remains a self-discovery. Sometimes it leads to God and at others makes the person self-righteous. Today's scripture readings invite us to recognize our failures, not only in deeds but also in attitudes. They invite us to call on the Lord and seek his forgiveness. The Gospel of today tells us that salvation is not automatic. It requires the cooperation and perseverance on our part to secure the kingdom of heaven. The Gospel tells us that there should be the willingness to enter through the narrow gate. The best chance of success is to humble and serve others. What really counts is how treat other people and accept them. It means that if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven we must mortify ourselves and make sacrifices in order to achieve our final goal. We have the hope that Jesus is the door through which we enter the kingdom. In the first reading Prophet Isaiah sees all nations making their way to the Holy City. They come from all over the world to Jerusalem along with those who returned from exile to serve the Lord in complete joy and happiness and a new spiritual brotherhood. In the second reading we are encouraged to accept difficulties as God's discipline. Such discipline is a true opportunity to grow as true children of God. They are the indication that God loves us and corrects us as a loving parent through the pains and sufferings in our life.

In the first reading of today, Prophet Isaiah aims to console those people of Israel who had returned from exile and were depressed having witnessed the miserable state of Jerusalem and the poverty of their motherland. Their Temple was destroyed and they felt that God had abandoned them. The Prophet speaks to them perseveringly about the future glory of Jerusalem to which people from every nation will come. Their city would be the centre from which the knowledge of the true God would go out in all directions. God's glory is associated with the things God does to lead people to salvation. The recipients of God's saving grace are primarily of all the people of Israel, chosen as God's covenant people. They will be brought back to give God honour, by the gentiles who now know the true God. The chosen people too have the task of proclaiming God's marvels to other nations and bring them to the service of God on the mountain of Jerusalem. There will be peace and tranquility where warfare and commerce are replaced with worship. Horses and chariots once used in war now serve as transport for God's people. Mules and camels that once carried the earth now carry a much more precious

cargo: Israel's spiritual brothers and sisters. The new Temple will be served by all members of the gentile races, a great advance on the narrow racial outlook hitherto practiced among the chosen people of God.

The second reading taken from the letter to the Hebrews tells us that we must expect hardship which is part of our training. We cannot win the ultimate prize unless we undergo such training. It is God our loving Father who sends us these trials and he is our trainer. He loves us and corrects us as good Fathers who will lovingly correct their children their wrong doings. Hence all difficulties must be seen as a gift of a loving fathers and an opportunity to bring forth the peaceful fruit of righteousness. The author quotes the Book of Proverb which says that those whom God loves are advised to accept chastisement and correction from God. In fact God corrects and reproves them in order to make them fit to face life and reach the ultimate goal God has destined for them. He asks the Christians to accept all trials because God is sending them for their spiritual good. Being human, everyone feels physical and mental pain when trials come but they bring forth the fruit too which is peace and justice. So he advices them not to move away from their Christian duty but persevere in their Christian path as it is the path to salvation.

The Lord's message in today's Gospel was primarily intended for the Jews who had heard his teaching and refused to believe in him. However the fate he foretells for them is the same fate which awaits all, Jews or gentiles, who fail to accept the Good News and live accordingly. Jesus tells us very clearly today that it is not enough to follow him, eat meals with him and listen to him. There is something more that has to be done. The response of Jesus comes with the question raised by the disciples whether only a few people are going to be saved. This also could be the result of the Jewish belief that only they would be saved. According to the Jewish tradition there was little possibility for the pagans to be saved. This question reflected the belief of many Jews in Jesus' time that they and they alone were God's "Chosen People" and that "pagans" and "unbelievers, the people who did not observe the Law of Moses, were outcasts to be rejected by God forever. The salvation of God's People, however, was virtually guaranteed, provided they kept the Law.

Jesus does not answer his enquirer's question directly. He counters the question with a parable which is in any case, quite clear to an open mind. Jesus speaks about coming in through a narrow door and about a householder who refuses to open the door after he has locked up for the night. The fact that those knocking at the door claim to be companions and very well known to him does not make him change his mind. "You are late and I do not recognize you any longer." Hence the response of

Jesus appears to be very cautious and restrictive. At the same time there is a tone of urgency and the requirement of great effort in this passage. All of this must be understood within the context of the Gospel's emphasis that the people he came to save, namely the Jews, and these very people were the ones who continue to reject him. Jesus answers this man's question by saying that one must first be careful about what one does, with a view to being saved, before one asks oneself about the salvation or damnation of others. The man or woman God created in his image and likeness must listen to his or her own conscience and do what is good for the sake of his or her eternal salvation. For each person's conscience concerns only him and God. Even if we are responsible for others, we can never act upon their conscience in the way that each of them and God can.

Therefore Jesus instructs his disciples that they must concern ourselves with the salvation of all men, but only if they entrust them to the care of divine Providence, and especially if they do not neglect ourselves. But Jesus also answers very clearly that "many will seek to enter and will not be able." This means that the elect of God are few in number compared to the number of the damned. "Many are called, but few are chosen." (Mt. 22:14) What a mystery! For God is good, he is Goodness itself. So then, why would he let so many of his creatures fail so miserably on the way of salvation? Saint Paul gave us the answer: it is a "Mystery of iniquity" (2 Thess. 2:7). He who is responsible for this loss is not God: it is man, who has followed the evil one. This is indeed a Mystery: for it is God who created man in his image and likeness, thus realizing, to some extent, a Mystery similar to that first Mystery which is himself. But, indeed, it is also a Mystery of iniquity: for the evil one and man have disfigured this image, rendering it unrecognizable due to sin.

However a careful reading of the passage reveals that Jesus indicates far more than a few individuals will be saved. The catch is that many of those who think that they would be included among the saved will be left out and many who are considered unfit for salvation will be included. Many understand this as a reference to the gentile mission which was extremely successful after Judaism had rejected Jesus. This is captured in the saying that "some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last." This dynamics of reversal continues in what is found in many of the parables of Jesus. The teaching of Jesus is filled with mystery and ambiguity that theologians will later attempt to explain. It is perhaps best to let the mystery and ambiguity stand as it is. We are given no answers to the many questions that this passage raises: such as the narrowness of the gate, a few being rejected, how a person can make out that he has done sufficient for his salvation and so on. God just does not give an explanation to this but calls us to work hard

for it. The point is that no one is guaranteed salvation because it is always a grace from God. No one can presume on this grace and so everyone must strive diligently to enter by the so called narrow gate or narrow door.

The image of a door has a special meaning that concerns the kingdom of God. Jesus' story about the door being shut to those who come too late suggests they had offended their host and deserved to be excluded. It was customary for teachers in Jesus' time to close the door on tardy students and not allow them back for a whole week in order to teach them a lesson in discipline and faithfulness. Jesus told this story in response to the question of who will make it to heaven. Many rabbis held that all Israel would be saved, except for a few blatant sinners who excluded themselves. Their belief was that they were specially chosen by God when he established a covenant with them. In the Gospel Jesus doesn't directly answer their question but his response is nonetheless unsettling on two counts. First, Jesus surprised his listeners by saying that one's membership as a covenanted people does not automatically mean entry into the kingdom of God. Second, Jesus asserts that many from the gentile nations would enter God's kingdom. God's kingdom is universal and his invitation is open to all. But Jesus warns that we can be excluded if we do not strive or make effort to enter by the narrow door. The door which Jesus had in mind was himself, his very person. He tells us that he is the door and any one if enters through him will be saved. This necessitates that we follow Jesus in the way of the cross and the cross Jesus opens the door for us to enter into his kingdom. However, to enter the kingdom of God one must struggle against the forces of temptation and whatever would hinder us from doing the will of God such as apathy, indifference, and compromise. The good news here is that we do not struggle alone; we have God with us and his grace is sufficient for us.

In the Gospel Jesus does not at all say that only a few will be saved. He seems to ignore such a question as trivial and useless. The whole thrust of the Gospel is that Jesus came to bring God's love and freedom to the whole world. The message of that Gospel is that there is not a single person, not a single people, nation, race, or class, which is excluded from experiencing the love and liberation that God offers. The primary role of the Christian community has never been simply to guarantee the "salvation" of its own members. It is not the function of the Church to turn all its energies in seeing that its members "save their souls" and sometimes pray for those in "outer darkness". The role of the Christian community is first and foremost to proclaim to the whole world the Good News about God's love for the world, to share the message of the Gospel about what constitutes real living with the whole world. Realistically speaking the term to be "saved" means, to be rescued or freed of any harm and thus remain in a close loving relationship with

God and with others. It is actively to share the vision of life that Jesus offered to us. "By this will all know you are my disciples that you love each other." By loving each other in the name and the spirit of Jesus is really all that is necessary to be "saved".

The next part of the discourse of Jesus deals, first of all, with the rejection of the Jewish People, which, for the most part, did not convert to Christianity. This rejection made it possible for the pagan Nations to enter the Church and thus to take for themselves the place that had been left vacant by those who were the first to be called: "And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." But what is most important in Jesus' discourse is the firmness and irrevocability of the following saying of the Lord: "When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us.' He will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' " For the gate is definitively closed. Let us retain the following truths, which will aid us on the road of salvation: baptism is a very great sacrament, but in order to be saved, baptism is not sufficient; he who prays will certainly be saved, for, through this prayer, God will give him his grace; as the life is, so is the death: he who lives well dies well, in the love of God.

We know that in Christ, the narrow door is symbolic of the hardships of life for those who follow Jesus. It is symbolic of accepting poverty, being of a charitable heart, forgiving others, being patient, etc. It is symbolic of not being ashamed of Jesus, of going forward and proudly speaking of His salvation. It is symbolic of accepting persecution for the sake of the Most Holy Name of Jesus. Thus all those who accept Jesus and his teaching will be with him in his kingdom. When we consider the love and mercy of Jesus, we come to perceive that His love draws us towards him, "the truth, the way and the life." To qualify for the mercy of Jesus, there must be a conversion, the complete change of heart of a repentant soul that is firmly committed to embracing the truth that opens the way to eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

A poor illiterate man wanted to be baptized. The parish priest asked him many questions to see whether he was fit for baptism. "Where was Jesus born? How many apostles did he have? How many years did he live? Where did he die? The poor man knew nothing of all these questions. Irritated, the priest then said, "At least you know prayers like the Our Father and the I Believe"? The man again shook his head. "What do you know then?" asked the priest flabbergasted. The man explained, "Before I met Jesus I was a drunkard who beat up my wife and children; I lost my job and was wasting my life." Then he continued, "But after

encountering Jesus, I've quit drinking. I work hard and have begun to love my family. For me Jesus is my personal Saviour!"

A movie star visiting a refugee camp in Bangladesh for publicity was repelled by the sight of the camp itself, dirty clothes and children without having proper bath. On the first morning he washed his hands a dozen times and did not want to touch anything and least of all the people all seemed to be covered with sores. Then he was bending down near a little ugly looking child mainly for the sake of photo, someone accidentally stood on the child's fingers. The child screamed and in a reflex, the movie star, forgetting the child's dirt and sores, grabbed him. He always remembered the warm body clinging to him and the crying stopped instantly. This was the great moment he learnt loving and he kept this photograph of this child prominently displayed in his house and never again hesitated to grab the opportunity of expressing love to others.

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